2: Boissevain E-5 (1960-1961) 1965
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CHAPTER V

The Church and Village Politics

Most Maltese regulate their lives by the daily and monthly cycle of religious activities. The major divisions of the day are rung from the bells of the village church. They first ring the Paternoster half an hour before the first Mass. Then the Angelus bell rings a call to prayer at eight in the morning, at noon and at sunset. The final bell of the day is rung two or three hours after sunset, and is a brief request for the living to remember the dead in their prayers. The call of the Angelus is observed by many. When it is rung, work and conversation stop whether in a government office or a village café, men remove their hats, and someone among them leads them in a short prayer. In Gozo I have seen a busy square become suddenly silent and many people kneel in the street as the Ave Maria was rung at sunset. People also often kneel in the streets when the bells announce the elevation of the Host during a sung Mass, and during Benediction in the evening. And finally, late in the evening, clusters of relatives and neighbours can be seen sitting in their open doorways reciting the Rosary together before they go to bed.

Most girls and women and many boys and men attend one of the three or four daily Masses which are offered in all parish churches between four and seven in the morning. Virtually every one in the village attends one of the five or six Masses offered on Sundays. The few who do not attend are known to the village, and are the subject of gossip and other social pressure. Since the recent dispute between the MLP and the Church, however, their numbers are increasing.

As the church bells mark the important hours of the day, so the principal divisions of the year are set out by the annual national and parochial religious feasts and processions. Besides being major religious occasions, they are eagerly looked forward to as recreational events. Though secular spectacles, such as political rallies, the government-run Carnival procession and, above all, the

2: Boissevain E-5 (1960-1961) 1965
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796 cinema, are becoming increasingly important, the principal
[541] amusements of the Maltese still generally have some connection
546 with their religious ceremonies. The French Consul in Malta at
[655] the beginning of the last century described this enjoyment of religion with great eloquence:

> Le Maltais a de la religion au fond de l'âme; cette religion, dont il remplit les devoirs sans ostentation, il l'aime autant plus qu'elle prend sa source, non seulement dans une foi sincère, mais encore dans cette habitude, contractée dès l'enfance, de chercher au sein des cérémonies religieuses un délassement, que les autres peuples trouvent dans les spectacles et les réjouissances publiques.[1]

People from all parishes come to take part in the diocesan celebrations of St. Joseph the Worker, Corpus Christi and Christ the King. These rallies and processions are usually held in Valletta and Floriana. The national festival of St. Paul's Shipwreck in February, which is also the titular feast of a Valletta parish, draws many people into the city. Another national feast commemorates the lifting of the great Turkish siege in 1565. This feast coincides with that of the Nativity of the Virgin Mary on September 8, and is celebrated with boat races and other aquatic competitions in the Grand Harbour. But the traditional national festivals for the country people are the feasts of St. Gregory in April and SS. Peter and Paul (*L-Imnarja*) in June. Though most of the pageantry of the former has been abolished, the custom of going for a picnic to Marsaxlokk, the little village just beyond the terminal point of the procession in Żejtun, lingers on. On the occasion of the feast of SS. Peter and Paul, thousands proceed to the Buskett, Malta's only wood, where they spend most of the
[543] night before the feast eating, drinking and singing. On the feast
[541] day they throng to see the agricultural show in the Buskett, the religious procession in Mdina and the bareback horse races that take place just outside Rabat. While these two feasts are the occasions for special outings for the villagers, they are generally looked upon as very low affairs by many from the professional and middle classes.

The principal religious spectacles, however, are those which are organized at the village level. During the course of a year in Kortin, for example, there are fourteen major celebrations and

[1] M. Miège, *Histoire de Malte* (3 vols., Paris, Paulin, 1840), III, 168.

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definition of the dogma of her immaculate conception four years earlier, and to St. Joseph, who was declared patron of the Catholic Church in 1870. Virtually all the secondary partiti are dedicated to one of these two.[1] At the same time, there was a general elaboration of the celebrations connected with the cult of saints, including the Italian and Sicilian custom of having bands play during the festas.[2] These were but a part of the more general influx of Italian ideas and customs which accompanied the refugees from Italy of the Risorgimento, who streamed into Malta following 1850. The propaganda efforts of the pro-Italian politicians of the time assisted in the diffusion of these customs, especially in the urban areas.

During this period a conception of social organization new to Malta was also gaining currency, namely the idea of voluntary associations for laymen, and in particular, social clubs for 'gentlemen'. After the establishment in Valletta of the exclusive British Union Club in 1826 and the equally exclusive Casino Maltese in 1850, clubs of various kinds began to spring up in many villages. They multiplied so rapidly that a local chronicler wrote in 1890, 'Today you don't find a village without one or two, nor a city without three or five.'[3]

The latter half of the last century was a period of relative economic prosperity for Malta. This resulted from the increase in military and naval activity after the outbreak of the Crimean War; the sharp expansion in government spending on public works programmes from 1859 to 1863; and the renewed world demand for Maltese cotton as a result of the cotton shortage created by the American Civil War.[4] The economic boom increased the demand for unskilled labour from the villages. This, in turn, helped to disseminate urban-Italian cultural traits. It also provided a financial basis which permitted increased expenditure on festa decorations, fireworks, and above all, uniforms and instruments for the bands. Finally, this period saw the establishment of government schools in all the villages. City-born schoolmasters moved into rural

[1] See Appendix A.

[2] See, for example, Giuseppe Pitrè, *Feste Patronali in Sicilia*, vol. XXI of *Biblioteca delle Tradizioni Popolari Siciliane* (Torino-Palermo, Carlo Clausen, 1900), *passim*. He also indicates that a number of Sicilian towns and villages are divided by rivalry between supporters of different saints. (pp. xlvii ff.)

[3] P. P. Castagna, *Lis-Storia Ta Malta* (3 vols.; Valletta, C. Busuttil, 1890), III, 128.

[4] Charles A. Price, *Malta and the Maltese: A Study in Nineteenth Century Migration* (Melbourne, Georgian House, 1954), pp. 105 ff.

7: Busuttil I, Y-4, 5 (no date) 1894
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796 There is also on each occasion a
[541] liberal display of fireworks on the evening before the feast day, with the usual amount of noise and glare, and several bands, civic and military, play choice selections of music to the great delight of the large concourse of persons assembled.

[346] The interior of the churches is always
[353] most beautifully and gracefully decorated
[794] for the occasion of the festival, and the inhabitants of each town or village are always vying with each other in contributing large sums of money for the purpose of decorating the church of the parish to which they belong. In most cases the feast day closes with a procession followed by the image of the Blessed Virgin, or that of the Saint who is being honoured, carried on the shoulders of some eight or ten men.

7: Busuttil I, Y-4, 5 (no date) 1894
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CARNIVAL

541 Among the several sources of popular amusements in Malta, the Carnival no doubt ranks first.

When the Carnival is about to make its usual visit, the dancing season, dinner parties and amusing entertainments begin.

541 This amusement, which affords a harm-
195 less outlet for the spirit of merry-making, was introduced in Malta during the Grandmastership of Peter Del Ponte in the year 1535. (*)

(*) Grand Master Lascaris, at the request, it is supposed, of some Jesuit fathers, gave orders in 1639 that no woman was to be allowed to mask herself, or to assist at any dramatic entertainment, on the 3 days of Carnival under penalty of being whipped. This order gave rise to serious disturbances and the Grand Master deemed it prudent not to interfere again.

Sir Patrick Stuart, Governor of Malta, determined in 1846 to reduce the Carnival by one day, not allowing any masqueraders on Sunday, the first day. This, however, led to a collision between the police and the people. The Governor, seeing that serious consequences would follow, let things take their usual course.

7: Busuttil I, Y-4, 5 (no date) 1894
EZ6 Malta EZ6

Carnival commences on the Saturday preceding lent, and ends on the Tuesday following. 54/•

On Saturday morning the "Parata" opens the Carnival diversions. This consists of about 30 men of the lower classes dressed up, some in gay Turkish costumes and others as European warriors, all armed with wooden swords.

These men meet first opposite the Governor's palace, where they commence dancing and striking their wooden swords with great dexterity to the sound of music. The dance is concluded by lifting up a little girl, splendidly arrayed, and girded with a small dagger which she is taught to wave with one hand, whilst with the other she throws kisses in a very graceful manner. The companies then range through the city, stopping to perform their

7: Busuttil I, Y-4, 5 (no date) 1894
EZ6 Malta EZ6

•541 evolutions before the doors of the wealthy, to whom the little girl, who is called "Il gharusa tal parata" (the bride), is taken after the performance to receive some money as a remuneration for the trouble taken by the men, who employ the money they collect in defraying the expenses of the band, and the buying or hiring of the costumes they wear. (*)

541 175 648 The parata is a commemoration of the famous victory which the Maltese gained over the Musulmans in 1565.

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[171] (*) In Dr. Chandler's "Travels in Greece" page 133, we read the following passage which bears great resemblance to our "Parata":

"Some Arabian and black slaves who had obtained their freedom and were settled at Athens had a feast on the performance of the rite of circumcision. The women danced in a ring with sticks in their hands, and turning in pairs, clashed them over their heads at intervals, singing wildly to the music."

7: Busuttil I, Y-4, 5 (no date) 1894
EZ6 Malta EZ6

In the afternoon of this first day of 541
the Carnival an extraordinary charivari takes place, especially in the streets of the towns of the Island. Troops of boys with their face besmeared, and clad in all kind of incongruous garment, parade through the streets with all sorts of instruments of noise, such as trumpets, drums, whistles and empty petroleum tin cans.

During the other three days of Carnival—Sunday, Monday and Tuesday—the streets of Valletta, of the three Cities and also those of the other populous villages, are, on the afternoon (that being the principal time of the amusement) always densely crowded with people to see the masqueraders walking and dancing about.

The rich dresses and costly costumes are no doubt to be best seen in Valletta.

7: Busuttil I, Y-4, 5 (no date) 1894
EZ6 Malta EZ6

541 Here are always some well got up companies and perfectly appointed perambulating satires. Every description of wheeled vehicle follow in a regular train through Str.Reale, Mezzodì, Mercanti and Cristoforo. The occupants of these hired vehicles engage mostly in pelting the bystanders, who will enter the list with them. The balconies of the houses are crowded with numerously gaily dressed spectators; the streets below are thronged with gay parties of pedestrians mingled with those clad in every variety of costume that fancy can suggest, and one and all play every imaginable sort of prank. The throwing of confits in the three days of Carnival has greatly increased lately especially in Valletta. Groups of ladies, and gentlemen engage in a warfare with a tiny sort of *confetti*; it is not uncommon, however, that some

7: Busuttil I, Y-4, 5 (no date) 1894
EZ6 Malta EZ6

big confits are thrown by some evil disposed person, and in such a manner, as to cause injury; in fact the Police authorities issue, every year, notifications warning persons against the throwing of hard substances. 541

On Monday the Governor of the Island gives a fancy dress ball at the Palace, which is always very numerously attended. Some of the costumes worn on this night are indeed magnificent, and the noble marble palace halls and corridors, once thronged by the knights of St. John of Jerusalem, present a truly picturesque appearance. A list of the persons present and the costumes worn is annually published in some of the local papers. 541 643

The Carnival is supposed to have been originally instituted in imitation of the Sigillaria or festival days added 541 173 177

7: Busuttil I, Y-4, 5 (no date) 1894
EZ6 Malta EZ6

541 173 177 to the ancient Saturnalia (*) and was condemned by the Synod of Trullus, where it was decreed that the days called the Calends should entirely be stripped of their ceremonies, and that the faithful should no longer observe them; that the public dancing of women should cease as being the occasion of much harm and ruin, and as being invented and observed in honour of the Gods of the heathens and therefore quite averse to the Christian life.

541 174 177 The author of "Convivial Antiquities" speaking about the ancient Saturnalia, says: that on this occasion there were

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(*) Saturnalia, festivals in honour of *Saturno*, celebrated in Rome about the middle of December. The celebration, which continued for 3 or more days, was remarkable for the liberty which universally prevailed. The slaves were permitted to ridicule their masters and to speak with freedom upon every subject.

7: Busuttil I, Y-4, 5 (no date) 1894
EZ6 Malta EZ6

frequent and luxurious feastings amongst friends, and changes of dress made, and the Christians have adopted the same customs. 541 • 174 [177]

He added, that as the heathens had their Saturnalia in December, Lupercalia and Baccanalia (*) in February, so amongst Christians three months are

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(*) Lupercalia, a yearly festival observed at Rome on the 15th of February in honour of *Pan* the God of Shepherds. It was usual to sacrifice two goats and a dog. The skins of the victims were cut into throngs, with which whips were made for the youths. With these whips the youths ran about the streets, almost naked, and whipped freely all those whom they met.

Baccanalia, festivals in honour of *Bacchus* (God of vintage, and of wine drinkers) at Rome—during the time of the celebration, the Romans clothed themselves in fawns' skins, fine linen and mitres; they carried "thyrsi" drums, pipes and flutes and crowned themselves with garlands of ivy, vine, fir &c. In this manner both sexes joined in the solemnity and ran about the streets nodding their heads dancing in ridiculous postures, and filling the air with hideous shrieks and shouts.

7: Busuttil I, Y-4, 5 (no date) 1894
EZ6 Malta EZ6

541 spent in feastings and revelling of every
174 kind.

FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT

796 In the afternoon of this day, which
783 is known by the name of "Hadd in-nies" (the people's Sunday), immense crowds of people, from all parts of the Island, flock to casal Zabbar, in their best Sunday finery, for the purpose of saying some prayers before our Lady of Graces (tal Grazia) in the pari-h Church of the village, as an atonement of the follies committed on the Carnival days, After paying the visit the people go out of the church parading the streets.

796 The numerous shops of the said vil-
265 lage are pretty well got up for this occasion. Stews, ham, cheesecakes, and other viands are profusely supplied for

7: Busuttil I, Y-4, 5 (no date) 1894
EZ6 Malta EZ6

527 When the viands are fairly consumed and the wine commences to use its influence, the jolly parties amuse themselves in dancing, singing, and playing their guitars and melodeons. These gratifications are carried on up to 3 or 4 p.m., when the picnic-makers drive back to see the races which are held on this day just below the walls of the old City, where the stout swarthy country women, to secure a good view, occupy their seats on the field walls for hours until they get nearly broiled in the blaze of a mid-summer sun.

The races commence at 6 p. m. and consist of mules, horses, and mares, which are entirely unharnessed, and the riders without any means of maintaining their position, except their legs which they fix under the animal's

7: Busuttil I, Y-4, 5 (no date) 1894
EZ6 Malta EZ6

belly, while with a thong in each hand they keep urging the gaily bedecked beasts to reach the goal first.

Soon after the races the merry parties set out on their return to their dwellings at quite a racing speed. Now you see every description of vehicle vying with its neighbour, and every driver urging with whip and voice to a reckless break-neck gallop his steed, adorned with two or more rows of tinkling bells hanging round the neck.

Flags and variegated silk handkerchiefs are streaming from the carriages, and ribbons from the horses' heads. Every cart is crammed, as only the Maltese can cram on anything on wheels. The sun-burnt country women are laughing and pelting the by-standers with apples, and waving tall green reeds and poplar branches in their

7: Busuttil I, Y-4, 5 (no date) 1894
EZ6 Malta EZ6

796 and the following day, are conducted with the usual solemnity and fervour. 547 There are also several races of quadrupeds in the afternoon of the day of the festival, similar to those which are held in Malta on the feast of S. S. Peter and Paul (L'Imnaria). These races bring the amusements to a close.

796 484 788 Worth mentioning is the custom which prevails amongst some of our country people on the 14th of August, the eve of the feast of "Santa Maria."

Groups of country men and country women, actuated purely by religious motives and a desire to honour the Great Mother of God, start for a pilgrimage of more than 8 hours walk on the morning of that summer day, heedless of the excessive heat of the scorching sun, to visit the churches at the 7 above mentioned villages dedicated to the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

7: Busuttil I, Y-4, 5 (no date) 1894
EZ6 Malta EZ6

St. ROCCO RACES

The famous horse race which is annually run at Pietà on the 16th of August, the feast day of St. Roque, is a source of great excitement to the large crowds of people who flock thither from all parts of the Island. 527 541 [196]

Although the races do not commence before 6 p.m. yet, as early as 3 o'clock, the Pietà creek is all covered with hundreds of boats of every description, laden with people; and all along the Pietà quay, from the Bathing house — the place from which the competing animals start—to the winning post, at a little distance from "Portes des Bombes" — is always lined with thousands of spectators in order to witness the sport.

Some 5 minutes before 6 o'clock, a [202] gun is fired as a signal for the people to clear the way; a second report is

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[202]

then heard, and some 10 or 12 donkeys are seen running at full speed, driven by jockeys, amidst great shouts and roars of laughter from the spectators, caused sometimes by the stubborness of some of the long eared quadrupeds, which instead of running keep kicking right and left, not being in humour perhaps on that day of being tormented by the constant goading of their merciless rider.

The donkey race is immediately followed by the horses first, and then that of the mares.

It is really grand to see the noble creatures, darting along the race course with neither saddles or bridles, and mounted barebacked by the gaily dressed jockeys.

When the Government prizes, which consist of gay stripes of richly brocaded

7: Busuttil I, Y-4, 5 (no date) 1894
EZ6 Malta EZ6

silk and lama cloth of gold, are distributed, all the crowds disperse and the victorious champions, loaded with honours and caresses, and covered with garlands of flowers and ribbons, are conducted in triumph through the streets of the town amidst the deafening cheers and acclamations of the populace. 527 541.

These races were instituted in 1593 during the reign of Grand Master Verdala, as popular rejoicings after that the plague, which was introduced in Malta through the carelessness of some of the authorities, had played great havoc for eighteen months amongst the inhabitants of the Island. 527 541 175 [731]

From this race all the other races which are held on different occasions during the year, both in Malta and in Gozo, owe their origin.

7: Busuttil I, Y-4, 5 (no date) 1894
EZ6 Malta EZ6

527 541 776 755 796 195

These races were first held on St. Roque's Feast day in consequence of the working of miraculous cures of the plague by St. Roque who was specially invoked by persons afflicted, while stricken himself with the desease, at Piacenza, in Italy.

THE "VITTORIA"

527 *Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary*

[796] The 8th. of September, the day dedicated to the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, is no doubt the grandest and the most popular day for the people of these Islands.

Both the streets and church of Senglea—the town in which the feast is celebrated—present on this occasion a most lively appearance.

[784] The grand illumination and the

7: Busuttil I, Y-4, 5 (no date) 1894
EZ6 Malta EZ6

527 In connection with this feast, horse
• 541 races take place at Sliema. The con-
525 course of people and the excitement are not less, on this occasion, than they are on the St. Rocco festival, the events being always contested with great spirit, and large sums exchange hands in the bets laid upon the respective favourites.

527 The national Feast at Cospicua is celebrated on the hillside of Sta. Margherita which is, on this occasion, very tastefully decorated and illuminated with Venetian lights to the delectation of many thousands.

[541] At the Sliema celebration the fireworks are set off on barges on the water and thousands cheer the beautiful display.

At Vittoriosa—the very scene of the final victory on Sept. 8th 1565—the commemoration of this most glorious event in History is fitly celebrated.

7: Busuttil I, Y-4, 5 (no date) 1894
EZ6 Malta EZ6

527 533 lively marches, parade the principal streets of the old town, preceded by large crowds of people with palm leaves and Maltese flags in their hands.

527 541 In the evening the enthusiasm in the beautifully illuminated square is intense and prolonged.

[533] Large crowds from all parts of the Island flock here to listen to the choice selections of music, played by the bands on the square, and to witness the grand display of fireworks.

These are indeed worth seeing, especially one set piece. This represents a real fort with the red and white cross banner of the knights at the top. This fort opens fire and is attacked by several Turkish men-of-war, with sails set and the crescent flying at the mast heads.

As these miniatures of old-fashioned

7: Busuttil I, Y-4, 5 (no date) 1894
EZ6 Malta EZ6

galleys come sailing across the square, on wires stretched over the people's heads, towards the fort, they open fire in great style. One after the other they meet their fate, for the fort peppers them cruelly and finally sets them on fire, so that soon—hulls, sails, masts, yards, crescent flags, and all the warlike things about them are in few seconds wrapped in flames and destroyed. 527 541

Before leaving the description of the celebration of this National *fète* at Vittoriosa, I wish to mention that hundreds of loaves are distributed to the needy of that town on the morning of the feast. 527 735

Worth mentioning is the custom which prevails, on the 7th of Sept. among the women residing at Rabato (Notabile) and in the country surrounding it. These, to celebrate the com- 184 527 533

7: Busuttil I, Y-4, 5 (no date) 1894
EZ6 Malta EZ6

796 in companies to some one of their
574 friends, at whose house they amuse them-
262 selves eating honey cakes and pancakes or fritters, and playing for nuts till the church bells ring a little before or after midnight.

At the conclusion of the service they come out again and devote the remainder of the night to amusements.

796 The approaching festival of Christmas
534 is heralded in some of the villages of
[184] Malta by the appearance of the "zakk" and "tambur" players in the streets. (*)

[237] The *zakk* or bagpipe is a wind instrument—one of the primitive instruments of sylvan music—formed of an inflated dog skin, which is held by the player under his left arm, with the legs

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[541] (*) The *Zakk* and tambourine are also in use amongst our lower classes on the days of Carnival.

9: Luke G-5 (ca. 1920-ca. 1960) 1960
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MALTESE WOMEN IN FALDETTAS
[See pp. 28–29.]

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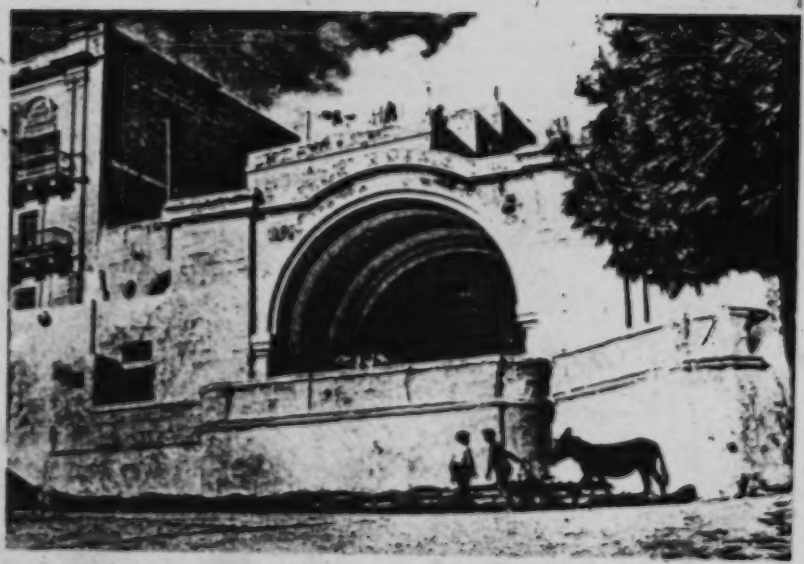

MNARJA RACES: THE GRAND MASTER'S (NOW THE GOVERNOR'S) BOX BELOW MDINA
[See pp. 27–28.]

[facing P. 41]
[pp. 41-48 not processed]